

## FROM THE SURFACE OF THE EARTH—FLAX

his second daughter married, his wife, instead of handing over a few surplus pots and pans to the bride so that she could begin her own collection of kitchen ware, *bought* new kitchen utensils for her! And his third daughter wore *silk dresses*!

It goes without saying that this family of rebellious females spent but little time at the spinning wheel since they had found the means to buy the materials they needed for clothing. And though our correspondent complained that all these purchases were making his expenses larger than his income, his women folk had discovered that money was the magic key that would free them forever from what was evidently needless drudgery at the flax and wool wheels.

From now on, women who were able to buy a few textiles could indulge themselves in a long suppressed love for something beautiful, something beyond the sheerly useful. From their surplus of home-woven materials, they now dared to take a length of linen and cover it with fine stitchery to make a purely ornamental towel. From their best flax they could now weave a patterned table cover, not for daily use but for "best," a term which often meant that it was too good ever to be used. In the chests in which such articles were stored the accumulation of plain and embroidered linen grew from year to year, a credit to housewifely abilities, a source of quiet pride.

The results of the invention in England of power-driven looms in 1785 were naturally felt sooner or later even in the hinterlands of the newly formed United States, although in all the rural districts the habit of using the hand-loom persisted for many years. As late as 1840, some of the Pennsylvania German women were still following their traditional toil at the wheel and the loom, though by this time the most conservative of farmers could hardly prevent their purchases of certain types of machine-loomed fabrics. But when the farmer himself was eventually convinced that cloth could be bought for less than it cost to manufacture it under his own roof, the homespun industries disappeared with almost startling speed. And no one was more delighted than the farmers' daughters when the days for home spinning finally passed, for with them vanished the dirtiest and most tedious task that had ever fallen to the lot of women.

Great improvements in transportation methods made possible the distribution of factory-made goods to even the most remote rural districts. Country stores became the willing agents for all kinds of merchandise and were the strongest influence in changing even so rigid a set of habits as the Pennsylvania German farmer cherished. After 1850, the blue of the flowering flax disappeared from the chequered layout of the summer fields; the farm women dressing flax were no longer a subject for derogatory comment by haughty foreign travellers; and spinning wheels were objects relegated to the dusty attics. And only a generation or so later, these same spinning wheels were looked upon, with what was really astounding detachment, as objects so quaint and decorative that, ornamented with satin bows, they were considered worthy of display in the parlor.